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L E T T E R

T O

DAVID GARRICK, Esq;

O N

OPENING THE THEATRE.

In which, with great Freedom, he is
told how he ought to behave.

———— All the World's a Stage,
And all the Men and Women meerly Players.
SHAKESPEAR.

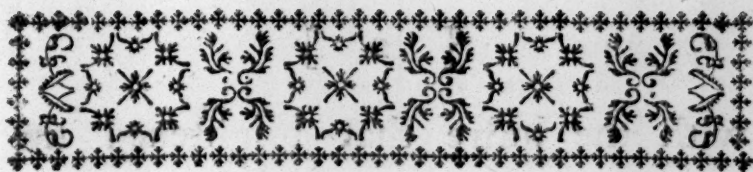
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T O

DAVID GARRICK, Esq;

S I R,

VERY lover of learning
E must be grieved, and, at the
same time, surprized, that
the spirit of dramatic poetry,
in which our countrymen have equalled
or surpassed the antients and moderns,
should now be almost totally extinct
amongst us. Our national genius, how-
ever, tho' it has not of late shone forth
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with the lustre that brightened the reigns of Queen Elizabeth, King James the Second, Charles the Second, and Queen Anne, must still be the same, Shakespear, Johnson, Otway, Dryden, and Vanbrugh, whom the present age admires, but seems to despair of faintly imitating, were but men, and men cannot degenerate in so short a period as that which has passed since Shakespear, Johnson, and Fletcher created the British Theatre, and carried it almost to perfection to this inglorious period, when Murphy is looked upon as a prop of the stage,

THE learned and ingenious M. de Fontenelle, in his remarks upon the controversy, whether the antients or moderns have a claim to the preference, with regard to literary merit,
has

has justly observed, that the whole dispute may be reduced to this one question, viz. Were the trees which grow in antient Greece and Italy higher or more verdant than those which grow in the countries we inhabit? If not, the controversy is determined. Time can no more produce a change in the minds of men, than in the other productions of nature. The heads of Homer and Virgil were undoubtedly made after the same manner as those of some who are born amongst us.

THIS observation, the truth of which no body will dispute, is applicable to the English of the present age, and those who lived in the reign of Queen Anne. There are undoubtedly Congreves and Vanbrughs, Rowes and Southernns amongst us, though their genius lies bu-

ried for want of an occasion to call it forth. It must then seem somewhat strange, that except the Suspicious Husband, there has not a good comedy appeared these twenty years, nor a tolerable tragedy during the same term. The only two I can recollect wherein I discover any symptoms of genius, are Irene and Euridice, yet these are much inferior to the tragedies of Rowe, who can by no means be ranked amongst superior genius's. When we come to consider what this dearth of genius is owing to, we cannot but ascribe it to the conduct of managers. The public has, we apprehend, as little reason to be satisfied with your conduct in this respect as with that of your predecessors. It is become so difficult to get a play upon the stage, that those who are capable of writing turn their talents another way,

way, dispairing of success : a piece is no more to be got upon the stage without having an interest with the theatrical minister, than a favour to be obtained at court without the intercession of powerful friends. Thus an inferior member of the republic of letters is possessed of a right of regulating the public diversions according to his will and pleasure, and of deciding the fate of the most important branch of literature.

I CANNOT help thinking, Sir, that the reverse of your conduct should be observed, and that that would be the only way to receive the dramatic genius, which is so much decayed amongst us, that a superficial observer would be apt to think that the intellectual faculties of our countrymen are no longer
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the same they were in Queen Anne's. Were pieces received with readiness, and new plays frequently represented, in the number, there must be some good ones. To this conduct I ascribe the continuance of the dramatic genius in France. It is not there at the discretion of the servants of the public to regulate the entertainment, and receive or reject pieces of pleasure; and yet the players in France are at least as good judges of the merit of a poetical composition as those of England. The gentlemen of the bed-chamber, who have the chief direction of the theatre decide in this matter, and to encourage genius, receive with great readiness such pieces as are offered, and do not by an ill-judged delicacy raise difficulties which might tend to suppress genius. The public is no loser hereby, for tho'
pieces

pieces are by these means pretty frequently exhibited, which the auditors do not think proper to hear out, yet this facility with which an author gets a piece represented, encourages so many to write, that there seldom passes a season which does not produce a piece that would have been thought worthy of the stage in the days of Racine. Not to mention *Monf. de Voltaire*, who must be allowed to be one of the first-rate dramatic genius's of Europe, and whose pieces are so beautiful, that they please in the pitiful translations of an *Aaron Hill*, or the equally pitiful imitation of a certain *Hybernian* bard, who having shewn himself incapable of writing a farce, in which he had nothing to do but draw his own character, at last carried his presumption so far as to measure swords with the greatest genius in Europe.

I HOWEVER approve of your receiving this piece, the reception it met with may perhaps encourage somebody of a genius superior to the Irish play-maker in question to dedicate his talents to the stage. It is better, no doubt, that twenty indifferent pieces should be represented than one good one suppressed. You indeed abated your severity in another instance last season, I mean in receiving the Rout, a pitiful farce, as destitute of humour, character, and incident, as either the Apprentice or the Upholsterer.

BUT to return to my subject, it is to this policy of receiving every play which offers that the French are indebted for some excellent pieces, both in the tragic and comic way, which have appeared long since the muses have deserted
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the British theatre. What have our dramatic writers produced these last twenty years, equal to those two excellent tragedies of *Monf. Chateau-brun*, entitled, *Les Trogens & Philoctete*. It is not four years since these pieces were represented for the first time, and the French stage has since been enriched with another, I mean *Iphygenie en Tauride*, a tragedy, which was represented for almost a season with universal applause, and by which the author gained immortal honour. He received, according to the custom of France, the approving acclamations of the audience. I need not inform you, Sir, that it is usual in France for an audience that assists at a new tragedy, whose merit excites their admiration, to call for the author, that he may in person partake of the applause

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due to his talents. Nothing like this ever happened in England: indeed people here are so engrossed with the players, that they scarce think the poet worthy of their notice, and this I look upon as a signal proof of that depravity of taste, which seems to characterize the present age.

IN France, those that frequent theatrical entertainments, make the piece represented the subject of their conversation; they criticise its faults, and cite its beauties with enthusiasm. In fine, Corneille, Racine, and Voltaire, are the principal subjects in theatrical conversations. Amongst our discerning countrymen, Mr. Mossop, Mr. Smith, and others of equal importance, are thought worthy to furnish matter for conversation. In France the best performer, or a
dume-

dumeniol, a Clairon, a Le Kain, are spoke of only by the by; here every insignificant player, from Mossop down to Dyer and Jefferson, are as much talked of by the public as a minister of state. But this is foreign to my present purpose. What I would earnestly recommend to you is, to represent as many new plays as possible, and let them stand or fall by their own merit. For this end, the custom of reviving old and obscure plays, which were perhaps never worth representing, should be suppressed; it would be much better to exhibit new ones for the reasons assigned above.

I HAVE heard, but can scarcely believe it, that the Orphan of China, a piece whose inconsistencies and contradictions can be equalled by nothing

but the ridiculous fustian in which it is wrote, is to be revived this season. This measure would in my opinion be a very false step in theatrical policy. To receive it was sufficient, I approve of your conduct in so doing, but to revive it would be very ill-judged, since this might prevent another new play from appearing; and surely the town must be better pleased to see a new tragedy, though as bad or worse, if possible, than to see the same wretched performance over again. I am told the author of this masterly performance proposes bringing another play upon the stage this season. Whether it is a tragedy or a comedy I cannot say, but that is not material, since the gentleman's abilities seem to be equal in both.

THIS

THIS I would advise you to receive by all means, and that for a reason which may, perhaps, be thought extraordinary by some, viz. because the Author's name puts it out of all doubt, that it must be execrably bad; and your receiving it, will convince authors that you are well-disposed to take whatever they offer. I must repeat it once more, that such encouragement of play-writers of all kinds is the only likely method to restore the British theatre to its ancient grandeur, and rival the modern French stage. It is indeed a melancholy consideration to all who have the literary reputation of their country at heart, that dramatic poetry should have declined amongst us, whilst it still flourishes in France. We may boast of having had a theatre, and in a high degree of perfection, long before the French.

French. M.de Voltaire owns this in his *Melange de Literature et Philosophiæ*, “Les Anglois avocent un theatre,” says he, “quand il n’y avoit que des treteaux “en France.” Must we then, whose bold and inventive genius brought dramatic poetry to perfection, when the French had nothing that deserved the name, who were possessed of tragedies equal to those of *Æschylus* and *Sophocles*, and of comedies superior to those of *Plautus* and *Terence*; when our neighbours contented themselves with the rude and barbarous pieces, whose subjects were furnished by scripture, such as the passion of Christ, the Acts of the Apostles, &c. Must we, I say, let ourselves be surpassed in this age by the French? That we are so, cannot be denied, and whoever thinks justly will acknowledge this to be owing to the
great

great difficulties which authors have to struggle with before they can bring a play upon the stage.

To confirm the truth of what I have advanced, I beg you would only consider the vast number of bad plays represented in the reigns of Charles the First, King William and Queen Anne; and here it is worthy of remark, that many of these were wrote by authors who composed some of the best pieces we have. In the works of Dryden, Otway, Lee, Southern and others, there are many pieces inferior to the worst now represented. This is a strong presumption, that the frequent call at that time for plays, however wrote, was what gave occasion to the composing of so many good ones, and if managers had then been as little disposed to receive

receive new pieces as they are now, the English theatre would never have made any figure.

The French have now the presumption to call their theatre the theatre of Europe, and this vanity is in some measure excuseable; they still have writers who support the glory of theirs, whilst we cannot boast a sprig of laurel more. With regard to our theatre, we may say, "*fuit ilium et ingens gloria tucorum.*" This decline of genius is owing in a great measure to your management, or rather mismanagement of the theatre.

To shew, however, that I am candid in my censure, I will not refuse justice to your merit, you have set an example which would be of considerable service to the stage if followed;
you

you have introduced the French taste in little pieces, in which they must be acknowledged to surpass us. I cannot but be of opinion, that our stage would be greatly improved were it supplied with little pieces taken from the French, that as the national manners are not as fully represented in little pieces as in comedies of five acts, would retain very little of a foreign air in a translation. This appears from the Guardian, in which, though an exact translation of *le Tuteur*, there is nothing in the characters or conduct of the piece, that can be thought singular by an English audience. But your backwardness to receive new plays is not the only reproach which the public has to make you. There are many more particulars in which you shew yourself

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equally negligent of their entertainment.

Drury-Lane play-house is generally looked upon as unrivalled by Covent-Garden; your single name has given it a degree of lustre, which no efforts of the manager of the other house could ever attain to. You may say in the words of Shakespear,

The king's name is a tower of strength
Which they upon the adverse faction want.

Yet notwithstanding the great reputation of Drury-Lane play-house, I have generally observed that plays are better acted at the other house. You are satisfied to reap the profits of a reputation already established, and now leave all the capital parts which you alone are
capable

capable of performing to the satisfaction of the town to wretched substitutes, who could hardly deliver a message with tolerable grace. Mossop, who is your second in tragedy, is as wretched a performer as ever disgraced any stage. He is fundamentally defective in every quality of a player, his elocution is harsh, unharmonious and unnatural, his gestures are awkward and ungainly, and he plays in a manner that shews him to have no idea of the character he plays. This is evident from the sameness in his performance. There is no difference between Hamlet, Macbeth, and Richard, as he plays them. He is the same unmeaning bellow in them all. Yet is this player in possession of all the capital parts in tragedy; and what is still more extraordinary, he has even had the assurance

to expose his ungainly person in genteel comedy; and, in the character of Bevil junior, lift his surly eye to the gentle Indiana. One would be inclined to think, that you give the most considerable of your parts to a player, who would do no honour to a company of strolers, with the same view which Augustus is said to have had in leaving the empire to Tiberius, “*ut ex comparatione determinâ gloria quæreretur.*”

Mossop is not, however, the only despicable performer to whom you give first-rate parts. We have seen Holland play Hamlet. I do not pretend to say that he acquitted himself as ill in the character as the above-mentioned player, who, indeed, seems to be the work of some of Nature’s journeymen, and is so far from being
equal

equal to the part of Hamlet, that he is not capable even of playing the mocking with a good grace : but surely, a character of such importance, which requires a thorough knowledge of human nature in the performer, should not have been given to so young and unexperienced a player. Fleetwood likewise appears in capital characters ; he has frequently played Romeo, and other parts, to numerous audiences. All this shews the great influence of your name.

WERE such pitiful players to perform on Covent-Garden stage, it would be, in all probability, to empty benches. But, such is the veneration of the town for the modern Roscius, that the most pitiful players who act on his theatre, derive a lustre from his name. In fine,
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we may say of him, in the words of Falstaff, He is not only a great player himself, but the cause why other men pass for great players.

It is your peculiar happiness, Sir, to have acquired such a degree of importance, that Nero was scarce more despotic in his theatre than you are in yours. Nay, in one particular, you seem to have the advantage of him: the Emperor was obliged to place guards amongst his audience to extort their applause; whereas, you are not only sure of receiving the loud applauses of the town, whenever you vouchsafe to appear yourself, but you have only to signify to the public, that such and such actors are to be applauded, and looked upon as first-rate performers; and so great is their complaisance, that
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the reputation of such players is immediately established.

THE bill may be looked upon as a sort of scale of theatrical merit, and the public has thus a criterion to judge of the abilities of performers. The importance of the part, and the size of the letters in which the names are printed, are sufficient to put the talents of a performer out of all dispute. Without this admirable expedient of large letters, the town might, perhaps, not have discernment enough to perceive that Richard is the chief part in the tragedy of that name. When Mossop plays, this I am sure of, that it is as ill-acted as any in the play; nay, some of the inferior parts are better done.

No spectator of taste will make any scruple of preferring the performance
of

of Davies in Buckingham to that of Mossop in Richard, of late years you seem to have entirely given up this part and most of the chief parts in the tragedies of Shakespear. It is a high favour if you deign to appear in one of them once in a season. In comedy indeed you appear oftener, finding it less fatiguing. I would therefore recommend it to you the ensuing season to represent no tragedies but new ones: in these you generally perform yourself, or, if you were even to leave these to inferior performers, it would be no great matter.

THERE is generally a congenial sympathy between our modern tragedy writers, and the underling performers of tragic parts. Thus Mossop, who could never utter a sentiment of Shakespear's with tolerable propriety,

propriety, exhibited a specimen of good acting in Agis a tragedy, in which the poet has admirably adapted himself to the genius of the player. The patriotical harangues in the play are so very insipid, that they suit exactly the phlegmatic uniformity of the player's manner.

A player should always have something of the genius of the poet in whose pieces he acts; and when an author happens to have no genius, as was the case of the gentleman that gave us the last new tragedy, it is very proper that the players that perform in the tragedy should resemble him in this respect. It was owing to this conformity between the poet and player, that when Agis was played, the part of the King was the best acted part in the play; and

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that when the Orphan was played, Zaphimri outshone the other characters. It must be owned to be a hard matter for a performer of real abilities to bring down his genius to nonsense, so that it does not seem surprising, that though you played Lyfander in the former of these pieces, and Zamti in the latter, Mossop outshined you in both of these plays.

I have one more reprimand to make you, Sir, you entirely neglect the scenery; the decorations at Covent-Garden are allowed by all persons of taste to be vastly superior to yours; it does not indeed seem strange, that you should think the town may be put off with bad paintings, since you can make such wretched players go down. A player should have much the same turn of genius

nus with a painter; the chief excellence of both is shewn in their expression, and you, it seems, are resolved to exhibit paintings in a taste conformable to the performance of your players. Your actors may be justly compared to sign and house-painters, and your decorations seem to be the work of hands equally masterly. In fine, your players and painters seem to be of a genius equally picturesque, they at least both agree in a certain quality that has been often ascribed to painters, namely, a proneness to deviate from common sense.

BUT I have dwelt sufficiently upon your faults, it is proper that I should acknowledge your merit. I have already taken notice of your superior abi-

lities as a player, and I make no doubt but every man of taste will agree with me in thinking you the best performer in Europe; you excel equally in tragedy and comedy, and neither France nor Italy can furnish an example of a player equally eminent in both. You have given proofs of a genius for dramatic poetry. Your prologues and epilogues are as spirited as any extant, and your farces are wrote in a better taste than most of those represented on the English stage. Your abilities I acknowledge, your indolence alone I find fault with. You have given some little pieces in the comic way, and it is matter of surprize to the public, that a new comedy has not been exhibited for some years past. You that have so admirable a knack at adopting French pieces to the English stage, could certainly oblige the

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the public with a piece in five acts taken from Pyrrhon, Gresset, or Destouches, this would certainly please the town much more than reviving the obsolete plays of Mopengier and other obscure authors, who would long since have been buried in oblivion, had not the veneration for antiquity procured them the attention of the curious.

THE plays I would particularly recommend to you are *La Metromanie* and *Le Mechant*. Both of which might with ease be adapted to the English stage, and be made equal to any of the comedies of Congreve or Vanbrugh.

I WOULD further recommend it to you to bring on no new actors this season; these insignificant f---s so much engross the attention of the town,

town, that the run they have upon their first appearance may often obstruct the reception of a new play; and I cannot but think even a bad play preferable to a bad player.

THUS, Sir, I have freely declared my opinion of theatrical gentlemen. I can conceive nothing more ridiculous than the importance which the opinion of the town has given them. I must own it offends me to the soul to hear such wretches as Mofop, Smith, and others of equal contemptible abilities, spoken of by ignorant and undiscerning spectators as first-rate actors and models of elocution. Whilst such performers appear in capital parts, young persons should not be allowed to frequent the theatre, lest they should catch a vicious

cious pronunciation, and contract an ungraceful manner.

I SHALL conclude, by recommending to you, in a particular manner, to retrench the salaries of your players; were Mossop, Fleetwood, &c. paid three times less than they are, they would still be paid three times better than they deserve. It must indeed raise the indignation of all that think justly, to see a Mossop, and other fellows, that Nature never intended for any thing higher than Hackney chairmen, possessed of an income of four or five hundred a year, when their theatrical talents would be overpaid by twenty shillings a week.

THUS,

THUS, Sir, have I taken up the pen to give you some directions with regard to your conduct as a manager, and I flatter myself, that by attending to these hints, you will be enabled to acquit yourself of that trust more to the satisfaction of the town than you have hitherto done.

I HAVE already exceeded the limits usually set to addresses of this nature, and, considering the variety of business, you must have upon your hands at this important juncture of the opening of the theatre, and the little leisure you have to attend to any thing but your own immediate concerns, I shall conclude, by recommending to you to consider, that authors are as necessary as actors to keep up the reputation of a theatre, and that you have more occasion for the former than the latter

latter, since you have shewn yourself
equal to every part as a player ; but
have not hitherto been able to produce
any thing in the dramatic way more
considerable than a farce. I am, with
a thorough sense of your merit,

S I R,

Your most obedient

humble Servant,

H. W.



[33]

I have been told you have been told
to every part as a lawyer but
I have not been able to produce
any thing in the way more
than a few lines and I am
sorry to hear of your illness



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Your most obedient

humble servant

W. H.

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